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ABSTRACT

The increased use of large-scale assessments to measure student achievement and school performance based on defined standards has had a profound impact on state board of education members and other state policymakers. Almost any decision that involves applying standards will, at some point, be unpopular. Everyone seems to be in favor of standards, but support drops off dramatically when the standards are applied. Policymakers must ensure that everyone who should know about the assessment, including the general public, receives information about it. The experience of Indiana illustrates the importance of communication and the usefulness of expert help, such as that provided by a public relations firm. The experience of Indiana also illustrates some of the concerns involved with issues of including all students in assessments and in disaster prevention and recovery procedures if testing errors occur. (SLD)

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a state *perspective*

The Too Often Neglected Aspects of STATE ASSESSMENT

by Suellen Reed

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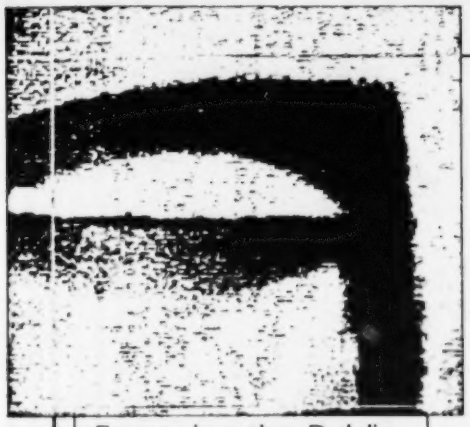
The increased use of large-scale assessments to measure student achievement and school performance based on defined standards has had a profound impact on state board of education members and other state policymakers.

Terms such as validity, reliability, sensitivity, content standards, NCEs, NPs, and many more, which used to be the exclusive province of assessment experts, now are part of the common parlance of policymaking.

As tests are used for expanded and more significant purposes, state boards have had to pay more attention to certain critical, but too often neglected, aspects of state assessment—engaging the public, including all students, and establishing disaster prevention and recovery procedures.



Engaging the Public

Almost any decision that involves applying standards will, at some point, be unpopular. Everyone seems to be in favor of standards, but support drops off dramatically when the standards are applied. It is an axiom of state policymaking that public acceptance of a decision, no matter how unpopular that decision may be, will increase in direct proportion to the number of people who are involved in the decision and informed about the decision-making process. So it is with state tests.

"Almost any decision that involves applying standards will, at some point, be unpopular. Everyone seems to be in favor of standards, but support drops off dramatically when the standards are applied."

State boards of education should involve as many people as possible throughout the process of creating a state assessment system. This includes broad involvement in adopting academic standards, developing the content and format of the test, reviewing the test questions to make sure they match the academic standards, and setting the passing score.

One important role state boards play in education governance is involving citizens and organizations in the policy development process, ensuring that this involvement includes the widest possible range of people. Every group that has the knowledge needed to develop the assessment system, every group that is affected by the system, and every group that has the ability to influence how others view the system should be represented.

This certainly means that teachers and administrators should be included, but what types of teachers and administrators? Probably all! Certainly the teachers at the grade levels where students will be tested are important, but teachers who work with students in years prior to the test and teachers who provide remediation based on test results must know what is going on.

Teachers of special student populations—special education, adult education, alternative education—usually end up being involved in the implementation of the assessment system but are often slighted during its development. Counselors, who frequently administer tests and are regularly called upon to explain test results to parents, also should be involved. Building- and district-level administrators, who speak to local school boards and local media, can have a profound impact. And policymakers should not forget local testing coordinators and higher education representatives, including teacher educators.

Important contributions to the development of the assessment system can be made by individuals who do not have "expert" knowledge but who will be affected by the test and have the uncanny ability to bang their fists on the table at the appropriate time and honestly ask policymakers, "What do you think you are doing?" This valuable reality check can be provided by representatives of the business and labor sectors, public officials, parents, and students.

Having successfully developed standards and an assessment system that accurately measures attainment of the standards, a natural tendency for policymakers is to sit back and wait for the test to be administered and for the results to roll in. What policymakers need to do at this juncture is much less natural because it amounts to repeating all of the public engagement that already has taken place—but now on a much larger scale. As important as it is for a large number of people to be involved in the development of the assessment system, it is infinitely more important for *everyone* to know about the assessment system. A state education official's worst nightmare is having just one student show up on the day that a state test, especially a graduation examination, is given without the student and the student's parents knowing that the test will be given.

The only way reasonably to expect to reach everyone who should know about the state assessment system is to use a broad range of media, and the best advice on how to get the message across is to seek professional help. State education agencies do many great things, but they do not do as good a job of informing the public about those great things. One of the wisest investments that can be made is to secure the services of a public relations firm.

Indiana's efforts included public service announcements, a statewide television series that aired on every public television station in the state, direct mail to the home of every student taking our graduation examination, a tabloid newsletter sent to every licensed teacher and administrator in the state, billboards, a public speaking cadre, the Internet, a toll-free telephone number, a booth at our state fair, and tangibles such as posters, T-shirts, hats, and pencils. Other techniques can and should be used. One of the most important things to keep in mind is to target the audience. Prepare separate materials for educators, parents and students, and the public.

Public messages must be interesting. Simple, straightforward language, visuals,

and music will help get the message across. The use of students and "heroes" helps. Indiana's first graduation examination public awareness campaign featured students from a performing arts high school in a toe-tapping, finger-snapping presentation telling students, "You've got to take it to make it." The Indianapolis Colts football team allowed several stars to appear in ads emphasizing the importance of going to school, studying, and doing one's best.

Do all of these things work? Probably not as well as policymakers would hope, but a decent measure of success—and one we actually experienced in Indiana—is having a grandparent come up to the state education agency's booth at the state fair and say, "My grandchild will be taking the state test in a couple of years, and I want to know more about it."

Including All Students

For a number of years states have had a goal of involving all students in all programs, including assessment. This goal has become a mandate with the advent of graduation examinations and the 1997 revisions to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IDEA revisions require participation of students with disabilities, where appropriate, in state assessment systems and the use of alternate assessments where participation in statewide or district-wide assessments is not appropriate.

By statute and state board rule, Indiana has included most students with disabilities in its state test since 1988, excluding only those who now would be subject to the alternate assessment under IDEA. Generally these students do not receive instruction in the academic standards measured by the test. Students with disabilities receive testing accommodations pursuant to state law and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The purpose of accommodations is to allow students to demonstrate their ability, not to make the task easier. Since students with disabilities are held to the same academic standards as other students, Indiana, like other states, has defined permissible testing accommodations to make sure that accommodations really accommodate the disability rather than modify the task to be accomplished. Accommodations are limited to those applied in the classroom, since it would be counterproductive to expect a student to use an accommodation on the state test if the student was not accustomed to using the same accommodation in classroom testing situations.

Indiana has always applied the same graduation requirements to students in special education programs and to students in general education programs. The adoption of Indiana's Graduation Qualifying Examination (GQE) and its application to students with disabilities made the issue of testing accommodations much more important. One ameliorating factor is that Indiana students technically do not need to pass the GQE—a criterion-referenced test of English and mathematics skills first given in the fall of grade ten and based on grade nine academic standards—in order to graduate. The statutory requirement is that students demonstrate the academic standards tested in the graduation examination, and they are given three ways to do so.

The first—and for the vast majority of students, the easiest—way to meet the graduation examination requirement is to pass the test. State law recognizes, however, that some students may have the requisite knowledge but may not be able to demonstrate that knowledge on the graduation examination, which is a combination of multiple-choice and constructed-response items. For these students, the testing statute provides an alternative mechanism.

A student who does not achieve a passing score on the graduation examination and who does not meet the requirements of subsection (c)* may be eligible to graduate if the student does all of the following:**

(1) Takes the graduation examination in each subject area in which the student did not achieve a passing score at least one (1) time every school year after the school year in which the student first takes the graduation examination.

(2) Completes remediation opportunities provided to the student by the student's school.

(3) Maintains a school attendance rate of at least ninety-five percent (95%) with excused absences not counting against the student's attendance.

(4) Maintains at least a "C" average or the equivalent in the courses comprising the credits specifically required for graduation by rule of the board.

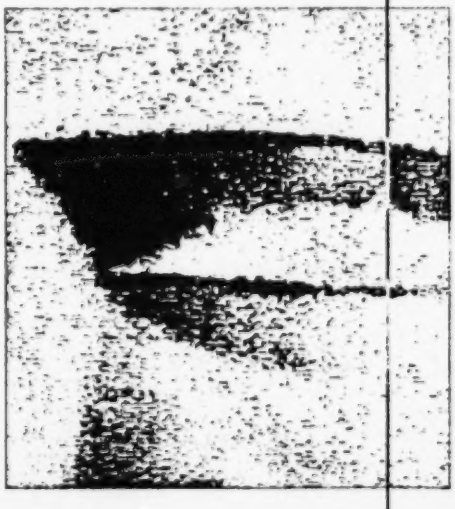
(5) Obtains a written recommendation from a teacher of the student in each subject area in which the student has not achieved a passing score. The recommendation must:

(A) be approved by the principal of the student's school; and

(B) be supported by documentation that the student has attained the academic standard in the subject area based upon:

*"Subsection (c)" refers to the third way that an Indiana student may meet the graduation qualifying examination. This alternative requires a student to successfully complete a college preparation course of study. This is a much more difficult standard, and it is expected that very few students will qualify under this alternative.

**This language applies to general education students. A separate subsection, which includes the same provisions but with additional language that acknowledges the responsibilities of the case conference committee and teacher of record, applies to special education students.



(i) tests other than the graduation examination; or
(ii) classroom work.

(6) Otherwise satisfies all state and local graduation requirements.

This provision, which may be unique to Indiana, provides a means to apply a single academic standard while recognizing that no single instrument may be acceptable to determine if a student has met the standard.

The IDEA requires the use of alternate assessments by July 1, 2000 for students who cannot appropriately participate in the statewide assessment system. These students share certain characteristics and typically: (1) have disabilities that prevent completion of traditional tests; (2) are not working toward a diploma; and (3) are working on a broader curriculum that focuses primarily on developing functional life skills.

To allow these students to demonstrate their abilities while still operating under the umbrella of a standardized assessment system, Indiana has developed the Indiana Assessment System of Educational Proficiencies (IASEP), which assesses progress both in life skills and academics.

Information about student performance is collected from several sources, including samples of a student's work; information about system supports that are in place for the student; interviews and surveys with the student and the student's family; and photos, audio clips, video tapes, or other documents that show the student's performance in a variety of areas.

The information is stored on diskette, as a kind of electronic portfolio. Multiple models are included: academic (based on state academic standards), recreational and leisure, personal, social, and vocational. Within each model, a standard rubric is applied, with student performance ratings on individual skills ranging from "full support" to "full independence." The program software generates individual and group reports.

Among the benefits of the IASEP is that it meets the requirements of federal law without irrevocably labeling a student as incapable of earning a high school diploma. Since state academic standards in English and mathematics are included, a student who progresses and demonstrates mastery of skills can move into a diploma track and begin participating in the standard state assessment.

Disaster Prevention and Recovery Procedures

Errors can occur with any test. As more (and increasingly complex) tests are given, the odds are that some error will occur with every test. Errors can include misprinted test booklets, calculators that do not work, inadvertent exposure of students to test items prior to taking assessments, scoring or calibrating mistakes, and, sadly, cheating. The results of many of these errors are extremely unpleasant. Scores of individuals or groups of students may be invalidated, results may be delayed, or reports may have to be reprinted.

Who is to blame? If blame must be established, then everyone involved needs to share—states that make extraordinary demands on testing companies, as well as testing companies that may not have utilized control measures to the same extent these measures are used in other data-driven industries.

States must have a plan to deal with potential problems because critics can turn errors in test administration, scoring, and reporting into attacks against the entire assessment system. State boards must be prepared to take strong action to correct errors while still defending the program. The best answer is to try to prevent errors by building quality into the assessment program, and the way to do so may very well be to do in advance what Indiana had to do after the fact.

In Indiana problems were detected in one of the procedures involved in producing scores for the norm-referenced test used as a part of the Indiana testing program. The Indiana Department of Education had no reason to believe that the criterion-referenced test, on which all high-stakes decisions are based, was affected in any way. There also was no reason to believe that the norm-referenced problem could not be fixed, but the problem occurred at a time when the Indiana program was under attack within the state and when every test publisher across the nation seemed to be having some type of difficulty. Indiana students were just beginning to take the state test, and a response was necessary.

Indiana demanded an independent review, to include assurances related to criterion-referenced scores, examination of the norm-referenced test, review of policies and procedures for the entire testing program, distribution of corrected reports, and a recovery plan to restore public confidence. The review was to be conducted by a national accounting firm, with the advice of an outside testing expert, and it was to be conducted at no cost to Indiana taxpayers.

The results of the review supported the criterion-referenced test, and there were suggestions for improvement that will benefit Indiana's testing program. Why was the review undertaken only after problems occurred? Because, like a lot of other states, Indiana did not think about including provisions for regular review of policies and procedures in its testing contract. That will not happen again.

Indiana bid specifications will now require all bidders to disclose any problems that have occurred in assessment systems operated for other states. All testing contracts will require the contractor to disclose problems, either in the Indiana program or other states, and to undergo regular reviews of policies and procedures.

Will these safeguards eliminate all problems? Likely not, because people still will be involved, and people make mistakes. But at least policymakers will spend less time worrying about mistakes and will have more time to try to figure out such things as the Anticipated Normal Curve Equivalent and the National Percentile by Age.

Suellen Reed is Indiana superintendent of public instruction and chair of the state board of education. Reed has served in a wide range of positions in the education field, having been a teacher at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent.

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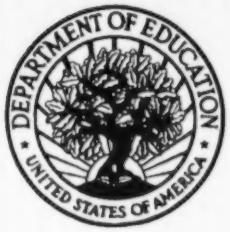

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